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American cash fires contra war

By Storer Rowley
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DALLAS—A private group that helps fund insurgents fighting to overthrow the leftist government of Nicaragua will host an international anticommunist conference here this week amid growing concerns in Congress over President Reagan's behind-the-scenes backing of those rebels.

Supporters of the insurgents, called contras, hope to use the 18th annual conference of the World Anticommunist League, convening Monday in Dallas, to encourage contributions and showcase recent military gains by the administration-backed contras against the Marxist Sandinista regime in Managua.

Moreover, the four-day conference will promote the causes and needs of anticommunist fighters in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Laos, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Vietnam.

"There are eight active democratic revolutions going on inside the Soviet empire," said Maj. Gen. John Singlaub, a retired U.S. Army officer and current chairman of the United States Council for World Freedom, the local league chapter hosting the conference.

Singlaub said that he wants world recognition for these "freedom fighters" who "have concluded, after being under communist domination for a given time, that it is better to be dead than remain red."

In an interview, Singlaub, who is considered to be the contras' most influential private fundraiser in this country, asserted that the contras gradually were winning their war, expanding their forces and taking more control of the countryside.

Singlaub, 64, who was removed from a top command post in South Korea in 1977 when he publicly criticized President Jimmy Carter's decision to cut back troop strength there, blasted Congress as "irresponsible" and "immoral" for cutting military funding to the contras.

But, as delegates from perhaps 100 national affiliates and 15 international organizations gather here, members of Congress are taking a hard look at private efforts to fund the contras and the possibility of illegal White House involvement.

At least three congressional inquiries are planned to investigate whether a ranking member of the National Security Council broke the law by helping the contras and assisting private fundraising efforts in their behalf.

National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane said last week that neither the aide in question, Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, nor anyone else on his staff ever acted as a go-between for private aid to Nicaraguan rebels.

But the House and Senate Intelligence Committees and a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee are looking into reports that North gave military advice to the contras and helped them raise money from outside sources during a congressional ban on such activity.

In October, 1984, Congress passed the so-called Boland amendment, a strict ban against the CIA or any other U.S. agency "involved in intelligence" spending federal funds or "directly or indirectly" aiding the contras.

Singlaub harshly criticized the amendment, while noting it does not affect private citizens. "But there are just thousands and thousands of Americans who believe that the Boland amendment was irresponsible, that the Congress is dead wrong, that the Congress had been the target of a massive disinformation effort by the Sandinistas," he said.

Singlaub acknowledged that he has kept the administration informed of his contacts with the contras, most notably Adolfo Calero Portocarero, civilian leader of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest rebel group.

"We try to let the word out as to what we're about to do, and occasionally I have to talk to old friends in the Pentagon that I've avoided contact with," Singlaub explained. "And I tell them, 'This is what Calero wants me to do and I'm going to go ahead and do it unless you think it's a dumb idea or your boss thinks it's a dumb idea. Send me a signal.' "

Asked about the congressional investigations, Singlaub paraphrased McFarlane's statement that, even after advisers and aid are cut off, "the government has an obligation to keep track of what is going on down there. After all, we were deeply involved and you can't just ignore it."

Calero has estimated that the contras have received between \$20 million and \$25 million from private sources around the globe since Congress cut off funding and CIA assistance a year ago.

Last month, a reluctant Congress approved \$27 million in "humanitarian" aid and lawmakers are watching closely to see that Reagan distributes it only for nonlethal purposes.

"When it eventually gets implemented and they start getting a flow of money and supplies, it's going to take the pressure off of us in purely humanitarian things," Singlaub said, "and we'll be able then to just concentrate our monies on things that are prohibited by this bill."

For example, he said, these might include trucks that the contras desperately need but which are prohibited by the \$27 million aid bill.

But the fundraising activities of Singlaub's Council for World Freedom soon may get audited. Recently, 17 House Democrats urged the Internal Revenue Service to review the tax-exempt status of the council and another group raising money for anti-Sandinista forces.